DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 322 CE 076 285

AUTHOR	Vandegrift, Judith A.; Wright, Joel
TITLE	Public Perceptions of School to Work: First Year Progress. Arizona School to Work Briefing Paper #7.
INSTITUTION	Arizona State Univ., Tempe. Morrison Inst. for Public Policy.
SPONS AGENCY	Arizona State Dept. of Education, Phoenix. Div. of Adult Education.
PUB DATE	1997-07-00
NOTE	6p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Career Education; Curriculum Design; *Education Work Relationship; *Educational Change; Employer Attitudes; Needs Assessment; Parent Attitudes; *Partnerships in Education; Postsecondary Education; Program Design; Program Development; *Public Opinion; Public Support; School Business Relationship; Secondary Education; *State Programs; Statewide Planning; Teacher Attitudes; Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Arizona; School to Work Opportunities Act 1994

ABSTRACT

In spring 1997, Arizona repeated a spring 1996 statewide public poll that established baseline measures of public attitudes toward school-to-work (STW). Samples were drawn from three constituent groups: parents, businesses, and educators. Over 2,700 Arizonans participated each year. Overall awareness of STW was up significantly among every group. The belief that local schools were involved increased, but many parents, businesses, and teachers still said their schools were not involved or they were unsure. In both studies, a majority of educators rated the overall quality of education positively, whereas parents and businesses were more moderate in their ratings. Well over 90 percent of all groups said some degree of change was needed. Almost 90 percent of each group advocated that schools teach more than just basic skills. Three-quarters or more of all groups supported changing teachers' duties to emphasize instruction in teamwork, work habits, and work-related concerns; ensuring more collaboration in program and curriculum design; providing more comprehensive learning programs; providing "Career Majors"; and creating student employment opportunities. Two beliefs pervaded the emerging STW system: the state must do a better job of identifying and serving special populations and not everyone is optimistic STW will succeed. Over half of all groups would be willing to pay additional taxes to support STW programs and all groups would vote for candidates supportive of STW. (YLB)

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Public Perceptions of School To Work: First Year Progress

Arizona School To Work Briefing Paper #7 *July 1997*

by
Judith A. Vandegrift, Morrison Institute for Public Policy
and Joel Wright, Wright Consulting Services

Arizona is in the process of creating a comprehensive *statewide system* of school-to-work opportunities for Arizona students. Supported by a School To Work (STW) implementation grant from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education, the state has until the year 2000—when federal STW federal legislation sunsets—to accomplish this goal.

As part of creating a state system, Arizona—under the auspices of the Governor's Division of School To Work (GDSTW)—has invested in developing regional partnerships. Beginning in March 1996, 13 partnerships were funded for seven months at a cost of $2.4 million to either plan (8 contracts) or begin implementing (5 contracts) STW activities in their regions. For the current fiscal year (1996-97), the GDSTW awarded implementation contracts totaling roughly $5.7 million to 11 of the original partnerships plus two new partnerships. FY 1996-97 partnerships are identified in Figure 1.

Morrison Institute for Public Policy is coordinating a multi-faceted evaluation of the state's STW initiative on behalf of the GDSTW. One component of the evaluation involves public awareness and opinions of STW as a concept and a vehicle for education reform. In spring 1996, a statewide public poll was conducted to establish baseline measures of public attitudes toward STW prior to its widespread implementation. In spring 1997, the polling was repeated. This briefing paper highlights some initial findings from the state's first annual comparative study of public opinions toward STW. A more detailed report is forthcoming.

Previous reports and briefing papers detail the methodology of the polling, conducted by the independent firm of Wright Consulting Services. Briefly, however, both 1996 and 1997 samples were drawn from three constituent groups: parents, businesses, and educators. All samples were stratified by county and by STW partnership. Additionally, businesses were stratified by size (i.e., number of employees) and educators were stratified by role (i.e., teacher, principal, and superintendent) and by type of school (i.e., elementary, junior/ middle, high school). All samples were randomly selected, except for superintendents (all of whom were contacted).

Figure 1
Arizona's 1996-97 regional partnerships

- ★ Cochise County Consortium of STW
- ★ Coconino County STW Partnership
- ★ Eastern Arizona STW Partnership (Gila, Graham and Greenlee Counties)
- ★ East Valley STW Initiative (portions of Maricopa and Pinal Counties)
- ★ Mohave Workforce Development Partnership
- ★ Northeast Valley STW Partnership (portions of Maricopa County)
- ★ Northland STW Opportunities System (Apache and Navajo Counties except on the Navajo and Hopi reservations)
- ★ Phoenix STW Initiative (City of Phoenix portion of Maricopa County)
- ★ Pima & Santa Cruz Counties STW Partnership
- ★ Pinal County STW Partnership
- ★ Western Maricopa Consortium (portions of Maricopa County)
- ★ Yavapai County STW Partnership
- ★ Yuma/La Paz STW Partnership

Note: This list does not include four direct federally funded grantees all of which represent Native American tribes: Navajo/ Hopi (2), Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui.

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In 1996, a total of 2,788 Arizonans participated in the initial STW poll representing 750 parents, 750 businesses, and 1,288 educators comprised of 557 teachers and 731 administrators (i.e., principals and superintendents). These sample sizes yielded results that are statistically accurate within a 95% level of confidence (with margins of error not exceeding ± 4.1 percentage points).

For 1997, a total of 2,765 people responded to the poll including 801 parents, 800 businesses, and 1,164 educators comprised of 585 teachers and 579 administrators. The 1997 results also are statistically accurate within a 95% level of confidence (with margins of error not exceeding ± 4.1 percentage points).

Summary of Results

Highlights of the 1997 polling are discussed briefly in relation to five topics:

- ★ Public awareness of the STW initiative
- ★ Readiness for change
- ★ Reactions to specific changes embodied by STW
- ★ Specific attitudes toward STW
- ★ Support for the STW initiative

Public Awareness of the STW Initiative

Two questions on both the 1996 and 1997 survey probed respondents' awareness of the STW initiative. One question simply asked whether respondents had ever heard of STW. Figure 2 shows that—in one year— overall awareness of STW is up significantly among every constituent group. Awareness is up 16 points among parents, 17 points among businesses, 14 points among teachers, and 13 points among administrators.

A second question asked: "To the best of your knowledge, are the public schools *in your area* involved in the STW initiative or not?" This question is important because ***all*** schools in Arizona are encompassed by a regional STW partnership.

Table 1 shows a percentage increase in all groups' awareness of regional involvement in a STW partnership. The increase is statistically significant for all groups except parents. In fact, awareness among businesses and teachers has doubled in one year. Nevertheless, more than half of parents, businesses, and teachers report **not** knowing whether their schools are involved with STW.

Figure 2
Arizonans' awareness of the STW initiative

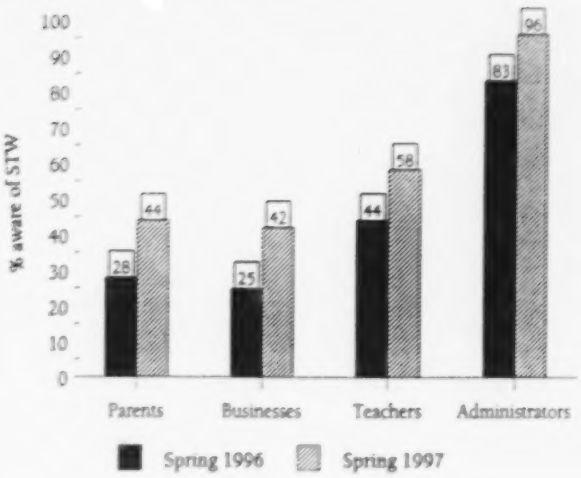

Table 1
Arizonans' awareness of involvement in a regional partnership

% awareness of regional involvement

	Spring 1996	Spring 1997
Parents	14%	17%
Businesses	11%	22%
Teachers	20%	40%
Administrators	62%	78%

Readiness for Change

As in 1996, three questions dealt with Arizonans' perceptions of and satisfaction with public education. First, respondents were asked to rate the overall quality of public school education. As in the baseline study, **a majority of educators rate the overall quality of education positively while parents and businesses are more moderate in their evaluations**. Ratings of public education as

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"poor to very poor" are relatively low among all groups.

Respondents also were asked whether they felt that schools need to change how they operate. Although many consider public education to be of relatively high quality, **well over 90% of all groups say that some degree of change is necessary**. However, parents and businesses are more likely to say that major changes are needed, while educators are more likely to say that only minor changes are in order. These findings remain consistent with the 1996 results.

Asked what kind of changes are needed—specifically in terms of back-to-basics or more comprehensive education including skills such as computer and work skills—respondents clearly preferred a more comprehensive approach to education. **Almost 90 percent of each group advocate that schools teach more than just basic skills**. These numbers have changed little since last year.

Reactions to Specific Changes Embodied by STW

As in 1996, respondents were informed that the STW initiative could result in at least five significant changes in how Arizona's public schools operate. They were asked to indicate their support for or opposition to each proposed change. As last year, **fully three-quarters or more of *all* constituent groups support:**

- ★ Changing teachers' duties to emphasize instruction in teamwork, work habits and other work-related concerns
- ★ Changing the way programs/curriculum are designed—towards greater collaboration with business and community leaders, employers, and parents
- ★ Providing more comprehensive learning programs to better prepare students for work after they leave the public school system
- ★ Providing "Career Majors" for students
- ★ Creating employment opportunities for students while they are still in school

Specific Attitudes Toward STW

Specific items explored respondents' attitudes toward certain statements or phrases about STW. As a rule (similar to the 1996 findings) respondents tend to accept "positive" statements about STW and reject "negative" ones. For example, respondents indicate that it is true that STW is a good example of school reform. Conversely, they say it is untrue that STW is only for kids pursuing vocational or technical training. That is, they *do* accept that STW is valuable for the college-bound student.

However, two statements—controversial last year—remain so this year. First, significant numbers of all constituent groups appear to feel that STW may not be able to effectively serve students of different backgrounds and levels of ability. On the other hand, significant numbers also take the opposite stance.

Second, parents, businesses and teachers are split on whether STW will work in the schools. Many appear to feel that the initiative will fail because public school bureaucrats refuse to change the way they do business. Conversely, many also reject this notion.

Support for the STW Initiative

In both the 1996 and 1997 polling, constituent groups were asked whether—overall—they support or oppose the STW initiative. In 1996, results were that nearly 80% of each group indicated "support" or "strong support" of the initiative. The 1997 polling results continue to show very high levels of support for STW among all constituent groups. In fact, opposition to STW implementation remains at the ten percent mark or lower among all groups. Furthermore, **business support for STW has increased significantly by nine percentage points**. Support among other groups remains strong: up three percentage points among parents and administrators, and up four points among teachers. However, the statistical change between 1996 and 1997 is negligible for these three groups.

In 1996, respondents also were asked what they would be willing to do to personally support the STW initiative. Of seven options, two were repeated on the 1997 poll: whether respondents would be

willing to pay additional taxes ($50 per year) to fund STW programs and whether they would vote for or against political candidates running for office who are supportive of STW.

Similar to the findings for 1996, 1997 results indicate that **well over half of all groups would be willing to pay additional taxes to support STW programs.** The strongest opposition comes from non-educators (roughly one-third). Furthermore, by margins of more than four to one, **all groups say that they would vote for candidates supportive of STW.** However, one-third or more of all groups are undecided as to whether they would vote for STW-supportive candidates. Few say they would vote against a candidate who supports the initiative.

Conclusions

The "good news" from the 1996 poll was that the state could very well anticipate gains in public awareness given the low baseline. In fact, 1997 awareness data are extremely positive. Overall awareness is up significantly among every group and it is unlikely that increased awareness is a fluke. The degree of increase and pattern of the data (e.g., up among all) are too significant. In short, it seems clear that STW has been successful in the past year in getting its message out—particularly, out of the schools and into the consciousness of non-educators.

Data concerning whether local schools are involved in STW provide further evidence that the STW message is getting out. The belief that schools are involved is up across the board—particularly among educators. However, many parents, businesses and teachers still say that their schools are not involved or they are unsure. This suggests that significant work remains at both state and regional levels to engage schools in STW and "spread the word."

There remains a good climate to implement STW. While many people feel positively about public education in Arizona, the vast majority favor changing education to include the kinds of skills and incorporate activities reinforced by the School To Work Opportunities Act.

Polling results from both years suggest that two troubling beliefs pervade the emerging STW system. One belief suggests that the state ***must*** do a better job of identifying and serving special populations, and communicating their successes in the STW arena. A second challenge is posed by the fact that not all of those polled are uniformly optimistic that STW will succeed. It may well be that people are used to seeing educational programs come and go and thus view STW with skepticism—as they might view *any* initiative.

As the state moves into its third year of funding, and regional partnerships move into their second year of implementation, Arizona's biggest challenge is no longer to increase public awareness of School To Work. As a whole, the state has made huge gains in increasing awareness of STW while maintaining a strong level of support for the initiative among educators and non-educators alike. Rather, the biggest challenge will be to ensure that STW deserves its growing reputation—by documenting and communicating results of STW student and systems-building activities with policymakers, employers, educators, parents, and the public-at-large.

Arizona's SCHOOLTOWORK SYSTEM

For additional information about Arizona's School To Work initiative, contact:

The Governor's Division of School To Work

(602) 280-8130

Gary Abraham, Director
Mimi Bull, Marketing & Technical Assistance Coordinator

A division of
The Arizona Department of Commerce
Governor's Office of Workforce Development Policy

C. Diane Bishop, Assistant Deputy Director

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